

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

***THE UNITED STATES' SECOND MAJOR THEATER OF WAR:  
A BRIDGE TOO FAR?***

5605 U.S. MILITARY STRATEGY AND JOINT OPERATIONS

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***The United States' Second Major Theatre of War:  
A Bridge Too Far?***

**Introduction**

The United States National Security Strategy (NSS), as set forth by President William Jefferson Clinton in 1998, articulated the “Imperative for Engagement” abroad in order to remain secure at home in the aftermath of the “Cold War.” Accordingly, in an era marked by globalization, transnational interests and threats, and ethnic and regional strife, “. . . the United States must be prepared to use all instruments of National Power,

alone or in concert with allies and partners, to influence the actions of both state and non-state actors.” It further states, “. . .we must have the demonstrated will and capabilities to continue to exert global leadership and remain the security partner for the community of states that share our interests.”<sup>1</sup> Implicit in our NSS is a commitment by the United States Government (USG) to dedicate the resources necessary to successfully execute this global engagement strategy. To that end, this paper will explore the National Military Strategy (NMS) intended to support an NSS of “Engagement,” its three elements (“Shape, Respond, Prepare Now”), and the “Core Military Requirement” of being able to “deter and defeat nearly simultaneous, large-scale, cross-border aggression in two distant theatres in overlapping time frames, preferably in concert with regional allies.”<sup>2</sup> The basic question is: Does the military possess the capability in the decade ahead to execute this essential requirement?

*I submit the United States Armed Forces are capable of being defeated in a Second Major Theatre of War by a determined opportunistic foe! Why? Because the United States is rapidly approaching the classic mismatch between ends, ways, and means. Specifically, the military strategy supporting our security strategy of engagement is spreading our military arm too thin, the sophisticated technology of our forces is under-capitalized if we are to maintain the edge in conventional military capability, and our operational assumptions are in part based on wishful thinking. Why do we find ourselves at this dangerous juncture?*

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. President. *A National Security Strategy for a New Century*, (October 1998): 1-3.

<sup>2</sup> Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. *Shape, Respond, Prepare Now: A Military Strategy for a New Era*. (September 1997): 1-15.

## Commitments

### What We Are Doing Now?

Our National Military Strategy is founded on three elements: *shaping the international environment, responding to threats to our national interests, and preparing for an uncertain future*. The first pillar of the NMS is that of *shaping the international environment* to create conditions favorable to USG interests and global security.<sup>3</sup> But who is tasked to accomplish this immense undertaking and how will they go about accomplishing it?

The National Command Authority (NCA) is required by Congress to publish annually Contingency Planning Guidance (CPG) to the Commanders-in-Chief (CINCs) of the Combatant Commands specifying what shaping activities the military will conduct.<sup>4</sup> The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs issues further guidance to the CINCs in the Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan. The CINCs, in turn, develop Theatre Engagement Plans (TEP) for their respective Areas of Responsibility (AOR) which delineate virtually everything the forces assigned to them will do in the upcoming year, and plan to do in the following six years. These include but are not limited to such activities as military-to-military assistance, nation assistance, humanitarian operations, counter drug-counter terrorism operations, noncombatant evacuations, sanctions enforcement, peace keeping, and peace enforcement missions.

Clearly, this basket full of tasks is a tremendous strain on the resources of our armed forces and the geographic CINCs! In fact, widely quoted estimates place over 225,000 uniformed personnel deployed throughout the world on any given day. And

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. , 1.

<sup>4</sup> Title 10, United States Code, Section 113.

these commitments are being met by a military force some 35 percent smaller than just a decade ago. The strain on manpower, systems, and budgets has driven readiness rates down, operating costs up, and personnel to vote with their feet. Retention and recruiting are under their greatest pressure since the advent of the All Volunteer Force. The US Commission on National Security (Hart-Rudman) recently recognized the magnitude of the problem by saying, “America must not exhaust itself by limitless commitments.” It went on to say, “. . . a finer calculus must be applied when deciding to intervene militarily abroad.”

At the same time, the CINCs are attempting to meet the other four tasks inherent in the NMS -- promote regional stability through cooperative actions and alliances, prevent conflict and reduce threats through arms control measures and, most importantly, deter aggression through conventional military capability, forward presence, force projection capability, and military coalition building. The result of all this global “engagement” and “shaping” is an over-committed and under-resourced military ever more vulnerable to a serious challenge to its core military requirement -- being able to deter and if necessary fight and win two majors theater wars during overlapping time-frames.

Major theatre wars, though most challenging, are in fact least likely to occur. However, many other challenges to our interests cause the USG to respond with military force or forces --- the second element of our NMS.

#### What Must We Be Able To Do?

The second element of our national security strategy calls for the United States to *respond to the full spectrum of security crises* threatening our national interests

throughout the world. The burden of being the dominant global power means being prepared to use that power when called upon to support allies, deter or defeat foes or join coalitions with similar security interests. History has demonstrated the USG lead in shaping the international environment will often fall short of our aims or be upset by “Wild Cards” or the miscalculations of aggressor states. Accordingly, our NMS requires our military forces be capable of responding from any position of global engagement to deter and defeat nearly simultaneous large-scale, cross-border aggression in two distant theatres in overlapping time frames, preferably with in concert with regional allies.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to this daunting military challenge, our forces must retain a credible capability to deter other potential aggressors or actors tempted to seize this opportunity to coerce neighboring states or indigenous people seeking international protection. All the while this core capability must be maintained by the military while concurrently responding to multiple smaller-scale contingencies (SSC).

These SSC operations encompass the full range of joint military operations beyond peacetime engagement activities, but short of major theatre warfare and include: show-of-force operations, interventions, limited strikes, noncombatant evacuation operations, no-fly zone enforcement, peace enforcement, maritime sanctions enforcement, counter-terrorism operations, peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief.<sup>6</sup> Given this requirement, the USG would presumably maintain sufficient military forces to accomplish these ends. But have they?

## **Costs**

### What Are The Opportunity Costs?

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<sup>5</sup> *Shape, Respond, Prepare Now: A Military Strategy for a New Era.* , 15.

The third element of our NMS strategy is to *prepare now for an uncertain future*. There are several facets to this strategy -- and each one is costly. First, is the implicit requirement to spend sufficient monies to recapitalize the equipment and infrastructure used by the military. Unfortunately, this has not been feasible in the recent political environment. In fact, the DOD Budget Authority in FY2001 constant dollars is actually declining in real terms over the FYDP, from 292 billion to 288 billion.<sup>7</sup> And, the portion of the Services budget used for recapitalization -- the Operations and Maintenance Accounts --- has frequently been used to fund shortfalls in paying for numerous SSCs and other military engagement operations. Also, the number and duration of these operations has exceeded the projected usage data for many major weapons systems. This is particularly true in numerous programs such as the F-15, F-16, C-5, and C-17.

The willingness or desire to employ the military component of our national power during “peacetime,” is truly unprecedented in our nation’s history. To illustrate this point, General Ryan, Air Force Chief of Staff recently noted “ . . . the Air Force has seen its commitments and operating tempo increase 400 percent since the end of the Cold War.”<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, we may have sacrificed operational readiness for fiscal expediency, without a realistic plan to make up this shortfall in equipment recapitalization.

Second, the USG is faced with the daunting task of trying to modernize nearly every branch of the armed forces at the same time. The Reagan defense build-up is over two decades old and many systems are reaching block obsolescence. The Air Force is

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<sup>6</sup> William S. Cohen, “*Report of the Quadrennial Defense Review*,” May 1997, Section III, “*Defense Strategy*,” 7-18.

<sup>7</sup> Tamar A. Mehuron, “*The Defense Budget at a Glance*”, April 2000, Air Force Magazine, 9.

<sup>8</sup> General Michael P. Ryan, USAF, “*Kosovo Retrospective*”, April 2000, Air Force Magazine, 30.



pursuing development of the F-22 and Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) while continuing to procure the C-17, B-2, and E-8 Joint Stars. The Navy is buying the F/A-18 E/F, a CVN-77 Aircraft Carrier, and the new DDG-51 class of destroyers. The Marine Corps is replacing nearly all its ground transportation systems, purchasing the Advanced Amphibian Assault Vehicle and its most expensive weapons purchase ever -- the V-22 Tiltrotor Aircraft. Additionally, the Marine Corps is staking its aviation future on a VSTOL JSF. The Army is trying to completely reconfigure their ground divisions to be lighter, more lethal, and easier to deploy by strategic lift assets while continuing to field the AH-64D and develop the RAH-66 helicopters. All the services are upgrading both tactical and garrison communication systems and demanding more robust space architecture to support their requirements.

Finally, the USG is committed to exploiting the “Revolution in Business Affairs” as it seeks more efficiency and effectiveness in the most wasteful of endeavors -- preparing for, deterring, and waging war! Clearly, this will require investment in capital goods, personnel training, and contractor assistance -- sunk costs the USG and the DOD must pay up front in the hopes of achieving future savings. All of these modernization initiatives are more costly than ever as the high technology dependent US military seeks to maintain and advance its technological advantage. These opportunity costs are eating up precious funds, and that adversely affects the military’s ability to fulfill its core military task -- to fight and win in two nearly simultaneous major regional wars.

## **Requirement**

What is the Impact of the Ways and Means Mismatch on the Core Military Requirement?

US plans to respond to a Major Regional Contingency are based on the projected requirement to defeat enemy forces of “up to one million men with between 2,000 and 4,000 tanks.”<sup>9</sup> The US response assumes forces of approximately four to five divisions, five to six Air Expeditionary Wings (AEFs), three to four Carrier Battle Groups (CVBGs), and one or two Marine Expeditionary Forces (MEFs). A doubling of this basket of forces to respond to two near simultaneous (within 45 days) crises, immediately raises issues of the *adequacy of our military forces, their locations prior to the start of the conflicts, and the depth of specialized capabilities like aerial refuelers, electronic warfare assets, deliberate NBC decontamination units, ground logistics support, etc.* Let’s examine each in turn.

The *US military has been reduced by about a third* over the last decade. Current active force levels include 10 Army Divisions (six heavy/four light), 12 AEFs, 12 CVBGs, and 3 MEFs. Virtually all active components, along with the majority of the Reserve Components in the four services, would be committed if the USG found itself fighting in a second major theatre war. Force size projections for the decade ahead are assumed to remain stable. Some would argue that smaller forces are adequate because of the US ability to deliver precision weapons coupled with our systems dominance offsets the losses in capability inherent in a smaller military. While this is true, it comes with a corresponding vulnerability -- loss of any one asset or system has greater impact than in the past.

The second challenge to executing a two MTW response is the *location of some of our forward deployed units and assets*, and their ability to disengage from current

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<sup>9</sup> Frederick W. Kagan and David T. Fautua, “*Could We Fight a War If We Had To?*” Commentary Magazine, May 1997.

commitments and be rapidly moved to other theatres. The 1<sup>st</sup> Armored and the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Divisions are in Europe. They are part of our NATO commitment and are the centerpiece of our shaping in Europe. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division is fully committed to the defense of South Korea. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division or the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division routinely deploys one Brigade to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. And finally, the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division has been tasked to field one experimental Brigade with dissimilar equipment requiring special logistics considerations. Also, these heavy forces are frequently providing elements and augmentation to light divisions such as the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division for theatre logistics support. When units like the 18<sup>th</sup> Airborne Corps and the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division leave some of their logistical units in Haiti and Bosnia to support rotational peacekeeping forces, they are less able to respond to crises elsewhere.

And when those crises occur, rapidly moving forces requires (primarily) strategic airlift. However, the Air Force's capability to move forces rapidly between theatres has been reduced by about 22 percent.<sup>10</sup> (One other issue worth noting is the impact of Presidential Support on AMC assets when the President is traveling abroad. A significant part of our strategic lift assets are often dedicated to meeting this "Priority 1A" tasking. Should a crisis develop when the President is abroad, there would be further delays in moving flexible deterrent options.) Clearly, the ability to deploy heavy formations to Southwest Asia and the Korean Peninsula in overlapping time frames without stripping EUCOM/NATO is a stretch. Additionally, the Army's National Guard enhanced-readiness brigade training level is suspect in many senior officers' minds -- an important part of the reason they were not sent to Operation DESERT STORM.

The third issue is one that has been discussed for years -- the problem of *high-demand*

*low-density assets and units.* The US operations in Kosovo placed unprecedented demands on numerous high-demand low-density assets and highlighted the shortfall in electronic counter-measures, airborne tankers, Rivet Joint and Joint-Stars aircraft. Additionally, strategic airlift was again taxed to support ongoing operations such as Operation SOUTHERN WATCH, rapidly moving ground and air units to Kosovo. The example of Task Force HAWK is a painful reminder of the demands on Air Mobility Command during both the build-up and sustainment phases of an MTW.

Perhaps the greatest example of requirement and capability mismatch is that of *deliberate NBC decontamination*. The NMS states, “. . . the Joint Force must be able to defeat adversaries in two distant, overlapping major theater wars from a posture of global engagement and in the face of Weapons of Mass Destruction and other asymmetrical threats.”<sup>11</sup> However, this capability is not resident in sufficient numbers in the any of the services’ active components, and barely adequate in the Reserves. This mismatch is a critical vulnerability in our military capability and directly impacts on our ability to execute a two MTW response. Potential adversaries might well be tempted to exploit this shortfall and not be deterred by the use of flexible deterrent options employed during times of crisis. How might an aggressor do this?

## **Risk**

### Operational Plans and Wishful Thinking

The US plan for winning a second major theatre war in close proximity to another conflict is approaching an unacceptable level of risk. *The US OPLANs are based on outdated assumptions and inadequate capability, and are vulnerable to asymmetric*

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<sup>10</sup> Kagan and Fautua, “*Could We Fight a War If We Had To?*”, 26.

<sup>11</sup> *Shape, Respond, Prepare Now: A Military Strategy for a New Era*, 24.

*attacks.* A determined and opportunistic adversary, using both symmetrical and asymmetrical attacks, could exploit US capability shortfalls and flawed operational assumptions to defeat our forces before the US could build up sufficient combat power for decisive victory. Let's review how this could happen, using the familiar MRC-E and MRC-W case study.

There are *five assumptions* bearing close scrutiny. *First is the issue of time.* The NMS requires the capability to defeat nearly simultaneous, large-scale, cross-border aggressors in overlapping time frames, preferably with regional allies. Although the actual time frame is classified, the widely quoted 45-days-between-crises is adequate for discussion purposes. But what if there is less time? Will the US have to choose a Win-Hold-Win strategy? If so, where do we hold and at what cost to prestige, casualties and long-term commitments?

*Second is the ability to fight "in concert with regional allies."* The technological gap in our communication, intelligence and weapon systems is increasing as the rest of the world devotes less money to equipment modernization, and research and development. How can our commanders expect to integrate allies who don't possess systems with comparable capabilities and adequate interoperability? Operation ALLIED FORCE highlighted the growing interoperability gap within NATO. What, then, is the prospect for working with regional allies in the Middle East?

*The third assumption, less valid than ever before, is the likelihood of enjoying the luxury of only fighting in distant theatres.* Our ability to rapidly project combat power and sustainment to distant theatres is dependent on numerous critical nodes in the US and enroute locations. Disruption using information attacks on communication systems or

destruction of critical infrastructure would greatly impede our ability to rapidly deploy and employ our forces.

*Fourth, is our ability to contract sufficient commercial ships to move our heavy forces.* Although the US has made significant strides in purchasing and leasing Fast Sealift Ships, major force projection remains highly dependent on the availability of contract shipping for the majority of bulk requirements. The absence of adequate US flagged vessels requires the DOD to compete in the global marketplace for shipping -- a factor any adversary could exploit.

*The final “wishful thinking assumption” is that the US will have the ability to swing combat forces from the first conflict to the second.* Inherent in this premise are several sub-assumptions -- the forces did not suffer significant losses, were not committed to sustained ground combat, had undergone the proper training, possessed appropriate equipment for the second theatre, and were capable of rapid reconstitution. However, absent any element of this laundry list, ground forces (in particular) are unlikely to be available for immediate commitment to a second crisis.

Having looked at some of our suspect assumptions, it is now appropriate to review our *two strategically important capability shortfalls*. The first and most serious capability shortfall is *insufficient strategic airlift*. General Charles T. Robertson, CINC TRANSCOM, conducted a study to determine if the Air Force could handle the task of swinging critical elements of the fighting force engaged in Operation ALLIED FORCE to a second MTW, as well as move US-based forces to the second hot spot within required timelines. It couldn't!<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> John A. Tirpak, “*Airlift Reality Check*”, December 1999, Air Force Magazine, 32.

The second major capability shortfall is *the lack of deliberate NBC decontamination capability* in both our active and reserve forces. The NMS specifically highlights the need to fight in this environment, yet the Services have not fielded the necessary capability. This lack of decontamination capability makes US forces extremely vulnerable to asymmetric attacks, severely degrades our combat efficiency, adds burdens to strategic airlift and medical evacuation assets, makes force reconstitution a much longer process, and directly impacts on Civil Reserve Air Fleet assets and commercial shipping. If not one, but both, theatres involve chemical or biological contamination, the likelihood of succeeding in the second MTW is remote.

## **Conclusion**

*The United States' ability to successfully meet its core military requirement of "deter and defeat nearly simultaneous, large-scale, cross-border aggression in two distant theatres in overlapping time frames, preferably with regional allies" is at risk.* The national security strategy and national military strategy have over-tasked our military element of power in an era of declining force structure and funding. This reduced capability along with the growing interoperability gap of our allies makes us increasingly vulnerable to asymmetric threats and ultimately subject to military and political defeat in a second major theatre war scenario.

Now is the time to review our engagement strategy before our adversaries are able to exploit our mismatched ends, ways and means. If we fail to do so, the United States risks not only its prestige and leadership mantle, but its sons and daughters, as well.